KATARINA DACIC / MELANCHOLY OBJECTS

AESTHETICIZATION AND REPRESENTATION OF THE RUINS OF DETROIT / 2016

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Introduction

Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy machines whose use is addictive.

Susan Sontag

Detroit is a city designed for cars in the first place, and everything since The Big Three[1] automobile companies established their position there in the beginning of the 20th century, has been influenced by that. This shaped the complete image of the city and gave an opportunity to welcome modernism, which was believed to lead to economic prosperity. There were certain architectural and design needs since people were moving to Detroit as the auto industries opened their doors for many. Today, the idea of modernism is linked to failure; from the city of industry to the city of ruins, the ironic connotation of Henry Ford's famous quote "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently"[2] is omnipresent. This idea of improving the quality of life in Detroit nowadays is followed by the act of getting involved in the art projects such as art installations, transforming the entire neighborhoods into galleries and performance venues, using ruins as a scenography, and for the photographers, who seem to profit the most from it - using ruins as the main subject: sometimes surreal, sometimes shocking, mourning, even painful, tragic, mysterious, sometimes aggressive, sometimes meaningless, but always obsessively beautiful.

This paper will examine aestheticization and representation of Detroit's ruins through camera lens. It will focus on the nature of architectural ruins in Detroit, comparing them to the ancient ruins, and trying to answer the question of everlasting ruin fascination which is nowadays often called ruinporn[3]. Why

1 The Big Three often refers to three automobile manufacturers established in Detroit, MI: The Ford Motor Company was incorporated in 1903, followed by General Motors Company in 1908 and Chrysler in 1925.

2 ''One who fears the future, who fears failure, limits his activities. Failure is only the opportunity more intelligently to begin again. There is no disgrace in honest failure; there is disgrace in fearing to fail. What is past is useful only as it suggests ways and means for progress.'' Ford, Henry. *My Life and Work: An Autobiography of Henry Ford.* Sioux Falls. Greenbook Publications, 2010. p. 19.

3 ''James Griffioen, writer and photographer of Sweet Juniper, a Detroit-based blog, is usually credited as the father of the term "ruin porn." He was first quoted using it in a 2009 piece in Vice magazine by Thomas Morton, who had asked Griffioen to guide him around the Motor City after the 2008 financial meltdown.'' Woodward, Richard B. *Disaster photography: when is docu-*

do we still, in the most progressive present tense, have such a big lust for ruins? What emotions ruins provoke in us and how is this aestheticization of misery serving art and design? This paper will examine both the potentials and failures, or pleasures and displeasures of photography when it comes to documenting the ruins. It will analyze different aspects that led the city to be recognized as a visual phenomenon. To understand how this had happened, firstly we will need to understand how Detroit has become one of the richest examples of metonymy and the emblematic of failing cities - from Fordism to something that is nowadays called Detroitism[4], from the city of industrial and design success, to the city of failure and decay and now to the city of scenography. What were the reasons for this decay and how people perceive it nowadays?

Since the subject of my thesis is ruins of Detroit[5], I went to Detroit in the summer of 2015[6]. Although I was on the very location of my research questions, I am still writing on the representation of the city, not on the "real" Detroit. As the city of Detroit is a particular example and as it is the most popular city of ruins, or "ghost town" as some might say[7] , it has been portrayed by many

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mentary exploitation? Artnews, 2013. In Artnews, Retrieved October 21, 2015. from http://www.artnews.com/2013/02/06/the-debate-over-ruin-porn/

4 A neologism and concept defined as "the fetish for crumbling urban landscapes mixed with eccentric utopian delusions, where bohemians from expensive coastal cities can have the $100 house and community garden of their dreams." Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism*. Guernica, 2011. In Guernica, Retrieved October 21, 2015, from https://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/

5 Why this subject interests me and why I find it personal, is because in the future I will have to deal with spatial questions as well as the representations of a space and relationship between photography and the space being photographed.

6 I visited many of the abandoned places, both residential and public, and I was feeling that addiction of constantly pressing the camera shutter, sometimes not even knowing why; the ruinous landscapes were indeed astonishing. It was mostly hard and occasionally illegal to get into some places, and it was often a dangerous job. One cannot stay indifferent after such an experience. I admit all these encounters had influence on my writing, too.

7 Indeed, sometimes I couldn't see a single person on the streets, and if I saw one, it might have looked as he is a part of scenography, especially if captured in the photograph, but still,

in literature, news, films, and especially through photography in various photo books and on the Internet. Through camera lens, Detroit is presented to us as a complex visual phenomenon. The ruins of Detroit, or preferably, the representation of the ruins of Detroit that attract artists and designers can be seen, in the way Susan Sontag used to evoke photography, as melancholy objects[8].

I could never agree that Detroit is a ghost town, especially now, when it is fashionable, if I may say, to be there and to work there as an artist or a designer.

8 *Melancholy Objects* was first used as a title of the essay written by Susan Sontag and published in her book *On Photography* in 1977.

I

Detroit as a metonym

Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.

Henry Ford

1.1 The representation of Detroit

Original use of the noun Detroit relates to the largest city in Michigan, USA. English-American dictionaries often include those definitions: A major industrial city and Great Lakes shipping centre in SE Michigan; population 912,062 (est. 2008). It is the centre of the US automobile industry, containing the headquarters of Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors (Oxford Dictionary); a city in the US state of Michigan. It is an important centre for making cars (Longman dictionary); a city of southeast Michigan on the Detroit River, a waterway, about 50 km (30 mi) long, marking the Canadian border between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie. Founded by French settlers in 1701, Detroit was the center of the US automobile industry in the 1900s (The American Heritage Dictionary). Detroit has been always connected with the US automobile industry that some of the dictionaries offer this phrase as a second or third definition for this noun. This is a metonymic use of the noun. Metonymy is, by definition, a trope in which one entity is used to stand for another associated entity[1]. It is the act of referring to something by the name of something else that is closely connected with it, for example using the White House for the US government[2]. Detroit remains a metonym for the American automobile industry (and a significant source of popular music legacies) celebrated by the city's two familiar nicknames, the Motor City and Motown[3].

Metonymic use of the nouns is closely connected to their representations and not the real image, although there are the historical reasons for them to exist. As Pierre Nora puts it, "Moments of history are being torn away from the movement of his-

1 In *LinguaLinks*, Retrieved October 14, 2015, from http://www-01.sil.org/linguistics/glossaryoflinguisticterms/WhatIsMetonymy.htm

2 In *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Retrieved October 14, 2015, from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/learner/metonymy

3 In *Forbes*, Retrieved October 14, 2015, from http://www.forbes.com/places/mi/detroit/

tory, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death."[4] In this transition metonyms are born.

Considering the history of the city along with its social, political and economic aspects, Detroit has become one of the richest examples of metonymy. "From the 1967 riots, when Detroit became the flashpoint of the country's political and racial crisis, to the deindustrialization and crime of the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties, the city has been a bellwether of each major urban crisis since World War II."[5] Decay, ghetto, bankruptcy, criminal, ghost town, urban crisis, corporate welfare, lament, failure, ground zero are just some of the most famous phrases of description when it comes to Detroit. Some of them, as being over-used and clichéd, have a potential to become new metonyms. "The substitution of "Detroit" for the auto industry bears within it an implicit, bitter irony, however, since the name of the city stands in for an industry that has largely abandoned it. "Detroit" can hold other, subtler meanings, too. For liberals, like George Monbiot in the Guardian newspaper, "Detroit" equals dirty industry and corporate welfare. For rightists, "Detroit" also connotes unions and other bogeymen of urban Democratic politics."[6] For the people on the Internet and generally outsiders, who enjoy using the hashtag ruinporn (or ruin porn) searching online galleries or keeping up to date with another Detroit story that comes out every week, Detroit stands for abandonment, collapse, never-ending deterioration or simply - urban ruins.

Urban ruins and industrial ruins exist everywhere in the world. There is no country or even city that managed to escape their presence. Then why is Detroit different from any other Eastern German city filled with forgotten factories or Northern Italian towns with disappearing textile industries? "America's most epic urban failure", as the synopsis of the book *Detroit City Is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis* suggests, has become the ultimate updated metonym, but it is yet to be discussed. First,

4 Nora, Pierre. *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Representations, no. 26, 1989. p. 12.

5 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism. Op. cit*.

6 *Id.*

we need to get a little deeper into the history to approve the existence of the phrase and to understand what caused it.

1.2 Anatomy of decay

In an article published by The New York Times entitled *How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings*, the writer is discussing with a woman, Marsha Cusic, when was the moment when everything went wrong in Detroit. She told him that everyone likes to point to the riot as that moment, and that it is easy to look at the riot as that nodal point, but then all the heat that came before is being ignored. Apart from the racial tensions, there were another factors, as important as this one: reliance on a single industry, shortcomings of leadership, lack of efficient transit system and impact of poverty. It is believed that all these causes tied together led to something that is often called "America's most epic urban failure".

Riots were coming in waves starting from 1932, when Ford Hunger March was happening in Dearborn. This riot was a demonstration of unemployed workers starting in Detroit and ending in Dearborn, Michigan and eventually it was an important part of a chain of events that led to the unionization of the U.S. auto industry. In 1943, there was another riot called Detroit Race Riot. Southern blacks began moving to Detroit in search of work at automobile factories. The rioting between blacks and whites began on Belle Isle on June 20, 1943, and continued until June 22, killing 34, wounding 433, and destroying property valued at $2 million ($27.5 million in 2015 US dollars). Another race riot happened 24 years after and lasted for five days. The riot was called 12th Street Riot or The 1967 Detroit riot and it was one of the deadliest and most destructive riots in the history of the United States, surpassing the violence and property destruction of 1943 Detroit Race Riot. The result was 43 dead, 1,189 injured, over 7,200 arrests, and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed. Again, another racially

motivated, but not as dangerous as the previous riot, took place in the summer of 1975. What came out of these riots was always connected to racial problems, which are still present in Detroit, 40 years after the last big one occurred. During the 1950s, the city lost 363,000 white residents while it gained 182,000 black residents. In 1950, the population was 16 percent black, and by the time of the 1967 riot it had grown to a third. Today, about 82 percent of the city's population is black.

But how can we blame only riots to affect the decay in such a big quantities? Statistics says the certain amount of buildings (including mostly residential buildings) were destroyed during the riots. As the migration of blacks who swept into Detroit became especially intense, middle-class whites began moving to the newly built suburbs. Riots were responsible for people moving from one place to another, often changing zip-codes and leaving their houses in a great hurry. At least, it looked like that.

Let's get back to this kind of history that is being created right now. During my recent visit to Detroit, I had a great honor to meet Scott Hocking, who creates site-specific sculptural installations and photography projects, often using found materials and abandoned locations. He was born in Redford Township, Michigan which is still considered as Detroit and it is labeled as a very "racist-white-poor person section", as he said so. During the interview that we made in his studio in Detroit I had an opportunity to speak with him about the racial problems nowadays and how this is still influencing the decay and possible gentrification.

"The racist problems in the city, sure, they still exist. They move, they undulate, they change. The inner city is extending, like almost concentric circles, and some areas that were more affluent have just moved further away and some areas that used to be more white or racist, now those white people have moved further away. And now, the center is being reborn with the people who are not interested and beyond racism and wanted to evolve and move further."[7]

Along with the racial tendencies factor, we just came to

7 From the interview with Scott Hocking

another factor that participated in creating the metonym we are talking about, and the one that is directly connected to it - auto industry. As much as people think that riots were the main factor that led to decay, others blame the auto industry.

At the time of the expansion of the auto industry in the 1920s Detroit was the fourth largest city in the country. People started moving to the city to work at Ford, General Motors and Chrysler, and by 1950 the population reached almost 1.85 million. At the height of this period of peace and prosperity the manufacturers began to reconstruct and people were not yet fully aware of the risks of the city's reliance on a single industry. Soon, it has all become clear. Between 1947 and 1963, the city lost over 140,000 manufacturing jobs. In the next decade, Japanese car imports took up a greater share of the United States market, which took even more jobs from the region. Unfortunately, Detroit became dependent on a single industry - automobiles - and the city's population dropped by over 40% from 1970 to 2006.

Once people started to move out and leave their homes, and once factories, schools and other public spaces were empty and left to ruin, scrappers started breaking in and taking away all the metal parts so they can resell them. But as Scott Hocking points it, this is not the main reason of the devastation of Detroit, which seems to be merely attributable to young kids. "Young kids who are predominantly from the suburbs, coming into the city, they break all the windows, they just want to trash it and then they go back home and everything's fine."[8]

In 1982 during TV commercial breaks pretty girls were dancing around the third generation of Ford Mustang and choir was harmoniously singing "Look out world, here comes Ford!" The auto industry and media still tried to send the peaceful and progressive image to the world, no matter that the failure was about take away everything once again. It seems that the whole history of the city can be described in a single quote by Henry Ford: "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time

more intelligently."[9] That is what the city was doing all over and what it is still doing - beginning again and again, but each time with a little less people and a little more abandoned buildings. What is left from the "this time more intelligently" part? In 2013, according to the US Census Bureau, Detroit counted a population of 701,475 people. It's currently estimated that Detroit's population will fall to just 610,000 people by 2030.

When Henry Ford was saying the famous sentence, that can almost sound like a spell, he didn't have in mind his own failure. Finally, it was the failure of something that made Detroit rise once - the failure of the auto industry, the failure of modernism and the failure of capitalism. This further led to increasing poverty, declining wages and social services, inadequate health care, unemployment, homelessness, and ecological disaster which resulted in Detroit being recognized as the emblematic of failing cities.

1.3 From Fordism to Detroitism

Before the failure and before decay it was success. The heydays of the auto industry certainly led to Detroit being recognized as Motor City. At that point, new term called Fordism took over the world which eventually led to the most recent one, and maybe yet not completely known and defined - Detroitism. Those terms, at this very moment, may appear to be antonyms. In the next paragraphs, I will try to analyze and compare them.

Fordism was introduced in 1914, when five-dollar, eight-hour per day was proposed by Henry Ford himself in his factory in Dearborn, MI as a sort of addition to already well established trends. Today, we can consider his innovations, both technical and organizational, as a simple extensions of something that had already started taking place. Before Fordism, Taylorism had al-

9 Ford, Henry. *My Life and Work: An Autobiography of Henry Ford. Op. cit.* p. 19.

ready happened. "What was special about Ford (and what ultimately separates Fordism from Taylorism), was his vision, his explicit recognition that mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labor power, a new politics of labor control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist and populist democratic society."[10] By definition, Fordism meant a way of organizing the working process based on the concept of an assembly line within a single production unit. In a political and social manner that supported mass production and consumption, Fordism improved the efficiency of the labor force by providing benefits such as housing, health care and social protection. But not everyone could profit from Fordism. Some sectors of high risk production were still depending on low wages and weak job security and this resulted in strong social movements that were considering a lot of inequalities - race, gender and ethnicity seemed to decide who had privileges and who did not.

Speaking of the present time, there is not much of success left behind Fordism. The past happened and this term evolved into a new one - Detroitism. For the moment, we cannot consider Detroitism being an official term, but we can be aware of its coming regarding all the metonyms and representations of the city. This term comes from an essay entitled *Detroitism* written by John Patrick Leary and published by Guernica magazine in January 2011. It seems that its author has borrowed the name from the song performed by Glenn Underground, published in 1995 and made in 1991, although there is no direct connection between these two links. From the understanding of the essay, Detroitism is a neologism defined as the fetish for crumbling urban landscapes mixed with eccentric utopian delusions, "it is either a nightmare image of the American Dream, where equal opportunity and abundance came to die, or as an updated version of it, where bohemians from expensive coastal cities can have

10 Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Cambridge. Blackwell, 1989. p. 126.

the one-hundred-dollar house and community garden of their dreams."[11] But Detroitism cannot be just that, Detroitism was born from the metonyms of its root word. Can we agree then that Detroitism really stands for a kind of fetishism? Is it a desire, is it a need, is it an obsession? When it comes to the representation of the city, and by this I mean the image that outsiders get, yes, it can be understood as a lust for ruins, for these crumbling landscapes, but for the natives, Detroit is never linked to utopia nor dystopia. Of course, the comeback narrative is present among the natives, but it is not romanticized. And if we stumble upon some interviews of the Detroiters on the internet, it is common to hear them saying "Detroit isn't some kind of abstract art project, it's for real people." Detroitism is the idea that we get when we think about the decay and its consequences. From the image that we, living far away from Detroit, get, Detroitism is also a love for Detroit, it is a way of living, it is the aftermath of modernism and capitalism. It certainly has to have an emotional weight, beauty and even fantastic disclosures, but never the same for the outsiders and for the insiders. "People now have ideas about Detroit as a mythology. So the journalists come and they need to write a story about how the auto industry has ruined Detroit. Well, if they come here and see that's not true... yeah, but we have to write a story about this so we're going to figure it out how to do this."[12] Detroitism is everything what Detroit now stands for, it is everything that Detroit represents. But it is also quite far from the Detroit known, lived and experienced by the natives.

From the point of view of my thesis, this is a phenomenon, a specific concept of representation of Detroit that is mostly understood through camera capturing photographs of ruins and abandoned buildings. This information is being sent to the outsiders daily. Like this, Detroit can be also seen as an imagi-

11 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism. Op. cit.* The example taken by Leary is to be qualified. Maybe it was like that in 2011, but this year it is a bit more expensive - $1000, as the city is trying to rise again and as the certain neighborhoods are in the process of gentrification.

12 From the interview with Scott Hocking

nary city, and for the locals it may seem as a foreign country. Detroitism is the transition between the city of cars to the kingdom of ruin photography. It is the effect of the shift between automobiles and cameras, both being perceived as totemic objects in modernism. As Susan Sontag says, "Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive."[13] It seems that since 1977, when this was said, nothing has changed. This idea has just developed more. Far beyond totems, far beyond compulsive needs, cameras evolved into something dangerous: they became predatory weapons, violent objects. They became the symbols of Detroitism, the missiles of medias, the tools of misunderstanding. They speak through photography and all they say is: we had cars, now we have ruins of car industries, we used to produce cars, now we produce the photographs of ruins left behind car industries.

Fordism, as well as Detroitism, it truly is a phenomenon. Today, we have the impression that these two terms are in juxtaposition even though they have the same origin, not only geographically speaking, but one produced the other. Following the (hi)story we can't resist but ask - what wasn't influenced by auto industry? The answer may as well be: everything was influenced by auto industry. As the city being built for it, to begin with the way the highways are integrated into the city and the inability to visit any (decent) grocery store by walking less than 40 minutes (which is, of course, common in most American big cities), to the appearance that at the moment there might be more parking spaces than inhabitants and more cars than inhabited residences, we couldn't say much more than agree that everything in Detroit was influenced by the rise and fall of auto industry. And the fall of the auto industry, as many outsiders get the image that this was the ultimate reason for decay, leads us to these attractive leftovers seen as ruins in many shapes and forms, and there, in these ruins, we find the opportunity to press the shutter once again and to begin again, more (or less) intelligently.

13 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York. Picador, 2001. p. 10.

II

Melancholy Objects

The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures.

Diderot

2.1 The aesthetic of ruins through time

Nowadays, it is not the auto industry that attracts people to come to Detroit. From the city of cars to the city of ruins, Detroit itself has become a scenography, a fairytale, a mythology. While the residents are leaving the city, outsiders (and many of them declared as photographers or designers) are coming with expensive cameras, going around, pressing the shutter. Everyone is fascinated by abandoned buildings. Everyone wants to publish a photo book about ruins, everyone wants to buy one. But how much of the story lies behind those photographs? What can we learn from it? A photograph of a ruin becomes its representation and it seems that it loses the meaning in this almost consumerist process. If they are supposed to make us able to feel, they might as well make us less able to feel, since the photographs of dying buildings are being used and reused all over again. How can a photograph of a ruin communicate with us, observers, or even explorers? What pleasures do we find in ruins?

Defining the ruin in semantic meaning by Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary suggests 1) the state or process of being destroyed or severely damaged, 2) the parts of a building that remain after it has been destroyed or severely damaged. Ruins are usually associated with something that is dead or dying, and often compared to cemeteries. They have mourning tone. But we can not consider ruins as dead objects, since they are the ones that have survived. As a reminder of something that happened in the past, and as the places to think through the meaning of time, ruins can make us homesick for the places we have never been to. They become melancholy objects.

In the spring of 2014, Tate Britain offered an exhibition entitled Ruin Lust. This exhibition was examining different uses of ruins in art starting from the 17th century until the very present. It included over 100 works by artists such as J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, John Martin, Eduardo Paolozzi, Rachel Whiteread and Tacita Dean. Since ancient times people were showing deep

appreciation for documenting the ruins through many forms of art: not only fine arts, but poetry, fiction, garden design and architecture. Today, as Detroit has become a kingdom of industrial ruins, it makes us think how we can link ancient and modern ruins and "why, in the most progressive present tense such as 21st century, do we lust more than ever after these symbols of disappearance and decay?"[1]

Rose Macaulay tried to explain this phenomenon in her book Pleasure of Ruins: "Since down the ages men have meditated before ruins, rhapsodized before them, mourned pleasurably over their ruination, it is interesting to speculate on the various strands in this complex enjoyment, on how much of it is admiration for the ruin as it was in its prime - *quanta Roma fuit, ipsa ruina docet* - how much aesthetic pleasure in its present appearance - *plus belle que la beauté est la ruine de la beauté* - how much is association, historical or literary, what part is played by morbid pleasure in decay, by righteous pleasure in retribution (for so often it is the proud and the bad who have fallen), by mystical pleasure in the destruction of all things mortal and the eternity of God (a common reaction, in the Middle Ages), by egotistic satisfaction in surviving (where now art thou? here still am I) by masochistic joy in a common destruction - L'homme va méditer sur les ruines des empires, il oublie qu'il est lui-même une ruine encore plus chancelante, et qu'il sera tombé avant ces débris - and by a dozen other entwined threads of pleasurable and melancholy emotion, of which the main strand is, one imagines, the romantic and conscious swimming down the hurrying river of time, whose mysterious reaches, stretching limitlessly behind, glimmer suddenly into view with these wracks washed on to the silted shores."[2] Rose Macaulay suggests that the earliest ruin pleasure was mixed with triumph over enemies, and it might be the most primitive one as it shows nothing but the pleasure of destroying the king-

1 In *Reading Ruins*, Tate Britain, Retrieved October 19, 2015 from http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/courses-and-workshops/reading-ruins

2 Macaulay, Rose. *Pleasure of Ruins*. London. Thames and Hudson, 1984. p. xvi

dom of the opponent. This is obviously not the case of Detroit, but further, she also suggests that the highest and the most noble pleasures of ruins are archaeology and antiquarianism, and they are rewarded by the beautiful thrills of triumph and discovery. We can compare this with something that is today called urban exploration. And indeed, while walking around Packard Automotive Plant or Lee Plaza Hotel in Detroit, we do feel excitement as if we found a new land. Further, Macaulay mentions looting and carrying away fragments as a different type of pleasure, then constructing among the ruins a dwelling or a hermitage, being portrayed against a ruinous background (this kind of pleasure can be easily understood nowadays in the times of social networks), self-projection into the past, and the pleasure of composing poetry and prose. But it is not only poetry and prose that comes out as a result, it is not uncommon that the 18th century in Europe made the ruin extremely popular in all branches of art as well as in garden design and architecture. The well known example is painting, as mentioned before. "If people painted and admired ruin pictures, it was (apart from mere fashion) because they got from them a satisfaction they needed."[3]

What is happening today, how do modern industrial ruins communicate with us, do they still inspire us to produce and design or does it all come to end up in a photography book? The symbols change through the time but the need doesn't. Tim Edensor listed the following potentials for using ruined space in his book *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*: plundering, home making, adventurous play, mundane leisure practices/ruins as exemplary sites and art space, which interests us the most. "The opportunity to play with objects and other forms of matter unselfconsciously is afforded by the lack of any surveillance and other onlookers and by the range of material that is often to hand. Accordingly, improvisatory sculptures suggest that they have been wrought by visitors at play. It is not surprising that such works are made, since twentieth-century artists have loosened ideas about the constituents of art works, making liberal

3 *Id.* p. 20.

use of waste materials."[4] Sometimes, as he further wrote, these spaces are used as part of larger schemes of artistic display. This is achieved through process of renovating the building, turning its parts into exhibition spaces, while simultaneously producing art works; today ruins can simply serve as a gallery space. But regarding the conditions of such a ruinous space, one can hardly walk into the space as a gallery, all those places are temporary places, and indeed, even though it seems that the opportunities that come out of the ruins are endless, their nature seems to be to end up in a photograph.

2.2 Ruin porn and ruin pain; Benefits and failures of ruin photography

To try to understand a city through photography must be beautiful but hard, to try to understand a city of ruins through photography must be even harder. When city becomes a visual phenomenon, photography has a very difficult task to fulfill.
"It would not be surprising if photographic methods which today, for the first time, are harking back to the preindustrial heyday of photography had an under-ground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry"[5] , Walter Benjamin noticed back in 1936. Today, we can see that they are being reborn from the crises of capitalist industry; it is photography that profits the most from the ruins of capitalism in Detroit, it is there and now the postindustrial heyday of photography.

During my visit to Detroit I happened to meet a German photographer, who came there to "take photos in order to publish a book later", as she said. The very next day I met her again by ac-

4 Edensor, Tim. *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality.* New York. Berg, 2005. p. 34.

5 Walter, Benjamin. Jennings, Michael William. Doherty, Brigid. Levin, Thomas Y. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. p. 275.

cident in front of Packard Plant while she was taking photographs and we had a small talk. She didn't know when the book would come out, or who would publish it, but she just knew she wanted to document "all these magnificent ruins and use them somehow after". There have been so many books published about ruins of Detroit, but photographers still crave more. The most popular ones are The Ruins of Detroit by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, and Detroit Disassembled by Andrew Moore. These books are written, or in fact – photographed, by outsiders. As Leary said it in his essay, "For someone from New York, Paris, or San Francisco, history seems more visible here, and this is the visual fascination that Detroit holds."[6]

What kind of pleasures do we seek in ruin photography? In the simple process of documenting something that is vanishing, the object such as ruin will mostly never have the same state. It could give us a feeling that such an object is always of high importance and that the next time it might not be there. If we want to acknowledge how soon these melancholy objects will perish, we might as well be deceived at the same time; some of them seem to stay forever while some of them - they don't even get to be photographed and they are gone. "There were dozens upon dozens, that all looked like that, all over the city, they're all gone now. Those are the only reminiscence now, there's not many left, but there were so many more, that have been all torn down, and there's already houses built there and those houses are abandoned now."[7] Another reason might be personal lust for ruins, that unexplainable attraction to perishing objects that can look almost surreal when shown in photos. These ruinous objects can be often understood as mysterious, and from the mystery we seek more, so we need more exploration and more photos. These objects, photographed or understood as monuments, sculptures, or just leftovers of something that used to be, invite sympathy. Another pleasure might be understood as collective lust for ruins, because they invite us to lament together. They remind us of real-

6 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism. Op. cit.*
7 From the interview with Scott Hocking

ity and inevitability of change. Some might see them as a hopeful side to awaken consciousness over the injuries of time. Furthermore, since abandoned and half-demolished buildings are understood as dangerous and mysterious, another reason might be simply gaining the pleasure of going to an unknown, risky zone and taking possession of the place visited.

As Susan Sontag writes in the very first page of her book On Photography "In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe." This makes me want to ask if everything in Detroit is worth looking at or if we are just randomly craving to collect more and more photographs or ruins? If "to take a photograph is to uncover the hidden truth"[8] , as Sontag is further writing, what kind of hidden truth are we able to uncover from a photograph of a ruin? We can feel like possessing a little part, some pellets of information about the past happened there, we can guess that something terrifying had happened, but what past do we possess, if we possess it through images? Again, it is the representation of the past, and a very limited one; unless we take history lessons, we can never possess the past that ruins represent. "So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city."[9] This kind of representation just evokes the feelings of past, and often it can be interpreted as a very personal past, or a very collective past. Most of the time, the only thing that we possess are feelings of sympathy, sadness and mystery. When we look at these photographs of ruins, our present becomes past, and the past itself becomes pastness and we are stuck with no real informa-

8 "The justification is still the same, that picture-taking serves a high purpose: uncovering a hidden truth, conserving a vanishing past." Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. *Op. cit.* p. 43.

9 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism. Op. cit.*

tiongained, falsifying reality. For the locals, in this case, familiar becomes vague. We guess, yes, Detroit is a city of ruins, city of failure, city where the auto industry used to rule. But we are left with not much more than that. In the end, is it possible that a photo of ruin becomes anything more than - a photo of ruin? And in the city like this, where no natural disasters had happened, where no wars destroyed the landscapes, even when we guess, we fail to guess. A ruin seems to be only a languageless subject, and if it is so, we can really not do much more then be touched by its existence and obsessively press the shutter once more. Like this, not only the object is being photographed but also recycled, and through a photograph, it is being recycled as much times as many people look at it and it can serve to any purpose. "An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen."[10] And we see these photographs everywhere: they are being exhibited in the museums and galleries, they are being published in different kinds of books and they are shown in medias almost everyday. For some, and certainly for the locals, this is understood as displeasure. Not only the compassion can appear as a feeling, but also rage and frustration. "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing "we" can do—but who is that "we"?—and nothing "they" can do either—and who are "they"?—then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic."[11] Some inhabitants put posters on their windows saying "Please don't take any pictures" or "Don't take my fucking picture". In the end, maybe only the outsiders can be declared as ruin photographers (if we can classify them like this), and maybe it is only the outsiders who can truly enjoy it. They might understand these photographs as an awareness of the suffering. But what suffering? People in Detroit, they do not grieve upon their melancholy objects, they live next to them, they

10 Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others.* New York. Picador, 2003. p. 105.
11 *Id.* p. 101.

pass them by everyday, they might enter them and spend some time there, but they do not suffer upon them. It is the artists who come to Detroit seeing human tragedy as an artistic opportunity.

2.3 Human tragedy is (not) an artistic opportunity; Melancholy projects

As ones see the opportunity to profit from abandoned places in Detroit by stealing the construction parts and then selling them, the others see those places as a scenography for their films, art installations and sculptures. Not only the car factories of yesterdays are being the main target for the artists and designers, but the whole abandoned neighborhoods, or random lonely houses somewhere on the road. One thing is certain: at this moment Detroit is a place to be; it is happening again as it happened in 18th century, ruin is again a raging fashion. It is a place where broken beauty has become the ultimate beauty. The most common thing believed is that by doing projects among and from ruins, is a part of the solution to get back Detroit on its feet.

One of such examples is The Heidelberg Project, which has already existed for 29 years. This place at Detroit's East Side is famous for using discarded objects to create art and it is defined as an organization designed to improve the lives of people and neighborhoods through art. It is one of the rare examples where a photograph is not the end result. There is a lot of symbolism in their work, their melancholy objects are not just architectural ruins, they use everything they find around: shoes, clocks, electrical appliances, wooden structures, cars, boats, bottles, toys, vinyl records. Sometimes, these symbols remind us of hard times riddled with drugs and deepening poverty, sometimes they warn as it's about time people took the initiative, sometimes they tell us about the ones who left the city in a big rush and about the ignorance of the others; one might be astonished or even afraid while looking at these houses and these carefully designed sculp-

tures. They are using everything they find around. All of those installations always have strong political connotation: Detroit vs. everyone, Taxi to New York, I'm toast, Grandma techno, One step at a time, Rewind it, Found weapons of mass destruction - are just some of the writings next to those objects. But possibly the one that describes the purpose of this art project the most is a reference to a Joy Division song written on the stairs of one Heidelberg house: "You've got the spirit, don't lose the feeling."[12] It might sound like a cliché, but what ties people together in this neighborhood is always hope and expressing themselves through artistic interventions over the abandoned houses, and although many of them have been ravaged by intentional fires, they are not giving up.

This is not the only example of people trying to destroy the art that came out as result of something that has already been destroyed. Sometimes, artists leave it to the test of time themselves. And this is where we can find the confirmation that everything made in the ruins exist, or has to end up in the photograph[13]. Particularly, in the next paragraphs I would like to focus on the work of Scott Hocking.

Scott, as a Detroit native, has a lot of insights regarding his city, its history and how it's been changing over the years. His work consists mostly of creating site-specific sculptural installations in abandoned buildings using the materials he finds at the site. But along with the installations he is doing photography projects. He is concerned about short-term memory of Detroit and how quickly nature reclaims its territory. His installations were done in popular buildings that are represented by media as the symbols of decay of Detroit. He built The Egg in Michigan Central Station, Ziggurat in Fisher Body Plant 21, Garden of the Gods on the collapsed roof of the Albert Kahn designed Packard auto-

12 "I've got the spirit, but lose the feeling", original lyrics from Joy Division song *Disorder*

13 "That most logical of nineteenth-century aesthetes, Mallarmé, said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph." Sontag, Susan. *On Photography. Op. cit.* p. 19.

mobile plant in Detroit. The reason why I chose to write about his work, is because he doesn't remember the heydays of auto industry since he never experienced it, and ruinous landscapes for him are not necessarily understood as sad and tragic. He is a local, from this time and this particular space, and he doesn't use his works of art as a comeback narrative. Still, his work is done in ruins and from the ruins and it is left to become a ruin again. With this being said, only photography can keep his work alive.

"I have no control, I don't own it, it could be destroyed, it could be vandalized, I don't know, all these options could happen. When I did start taking photos, it was just a documenting, so it took a long time before I felt my photos are also an art project. Now I'm doing the both, but there are still individual. They are for two different audiences, mostly the audience that sees them outside would never be the audience that would go to the gallery. And most of the time the people who would see them in museum would never be the people who would see them outside. I like this, it's a kind of play with two different worlds."[14]

This is also the example how ruins serve as a scenography, without retouching the exhibition space. In this context, the objects photographed, the objects exhibited, are not just another ruin photograph. And in this context, yes, those objects do exist to end up in a photograph, their photographs outlast the object itself. On the other hand, if we take the example of any other photographer-outsider, like Andrew Moore, or Julien Mauve, we do agree with John Patrick Leary that "the decontextualized aesthetics of ruin make them pictures of nothing and no place in particular. Detroit in these artists' work is, likewise, a mass of unique details that fails to tell a complete story."[15] In the case of Scott's work, the story is different, the goal is different. It is his unique perspective that allows him to produce something different then all the other outsiders. For him, Detroit is not a mythology, it is a city like any other city, and ruins are not much of a fascination. But in both cases, it is hard not to admit that human tragedy, or

14 From the interview with Scott Hocking

15 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism*. *Op. cit*.

Conclusion

It's the side effects that save us?

The National

Today, Detroit City truly is a place to be, but is it also a place to live? The American dream went wrong produced another American dream, or Detroit dream: "where bohemians from expensive coastal cities can have the one-hundred-dollar house and community garden of their dreams."[1] This dream of Detroitism is made for the outsiders, and there is a clear difference in its representation between the locals and outsiders. An optimistic delusion for outsiders is the reality for the natives, neither utopian nor dystopian. A "soaring, monumental, beautiful memorial"[2] for the outsiders is just a hometown for the locals. Melancholy objects, on the other hand, can be called by the same name for both of them. For the locals who remember the heydays it can certainly evoke nostalgia, but not a romanticized one. For us, who come from another city or another continent, they are extremely romanticized, and all different imaginary pasts are possible.

Detroitism is the effect of the shift between automobiles and cameras, both being perceived as totemic objects in modernism, highly compulsive. The idea of Susan Sontag "Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive"[3] still finds its justification 38 year after. The crucial role of a car is still present, but at the same time it is being replaced by a camera, and we can just wonder, or wait and see if the ruin photography of Detroit will still be popular in the years to come.

From what we've learned, ruin as a subject has a potential to be omnipresent, not only in the field of photography, but also in scenography and exhibition design. It seems that ruins stepped out from the 18th century paintings and became the canvas itself, transforming the whole city in an abstract art project and the subject of aesteticization. "In the ruin, history has merged sensuously with the setting. And so configured, history finds expression not as a process of eternal life, but rather as one of unstoppable de-

1 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism. Op. cit.*

2 "We should think about a soaring, monumental, beautiful memorial that draws millions of people here who just want to see it." Sorkin, Michael. *ALL OVER THE MAP: Writing on Buildings and Cities.* London. VERSO, 2013.

3 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography. Op. cit.* p. 10.

cline."[4] Photographs of ghostly ruins of the heavy industrial past, even if they represent stories of nothingness, no places in particular, or in the best case a mass of incomprehensible unique details, driven by anti-intellectual emotionalism and intuitionism, made Detroit be recognized as a visual phenomenon. They became the side effects of the death of the auto industry, decay, capitalism, modernism, the side effects of a success and a failure. The relationship between the disappearance of buildings and disappearance of the words to describe the images of them, seems only natural. "One is conscious of nothing so much as failure—of the city itself, of course, but also of the photographs to communicate anything more than that self-evident fact."[5] Despite all the absence of the reason, clichés and overusing of the ruin photography, and finally – its inability to tell the complete story, we can not argue about the publicity the city gets from it. A photo of a ruin – which stays a photo of a ruin, is enough to attract people to come to Detroit, and a view of a ruin before our very eyes, is enough to attract artists to work in Detroit. This takes us back to the famous saying of Henry Ford - "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently", which was originally a part of his business plan. We can understand ruin photography as a business nowadays, and maybe that is the side effect that saves us and maybe there we can find the opportunity to begin again – but how intelligently, only time can tell.

4 Walter, Benjamin. Jennings, Michael William. Doherty, Brigid. Levin, Thomas Y. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media. Op. cit.* p. 180.

5 Leary, John Patrick. *Detroitism. Op. cit.*

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Ford


PACKARD
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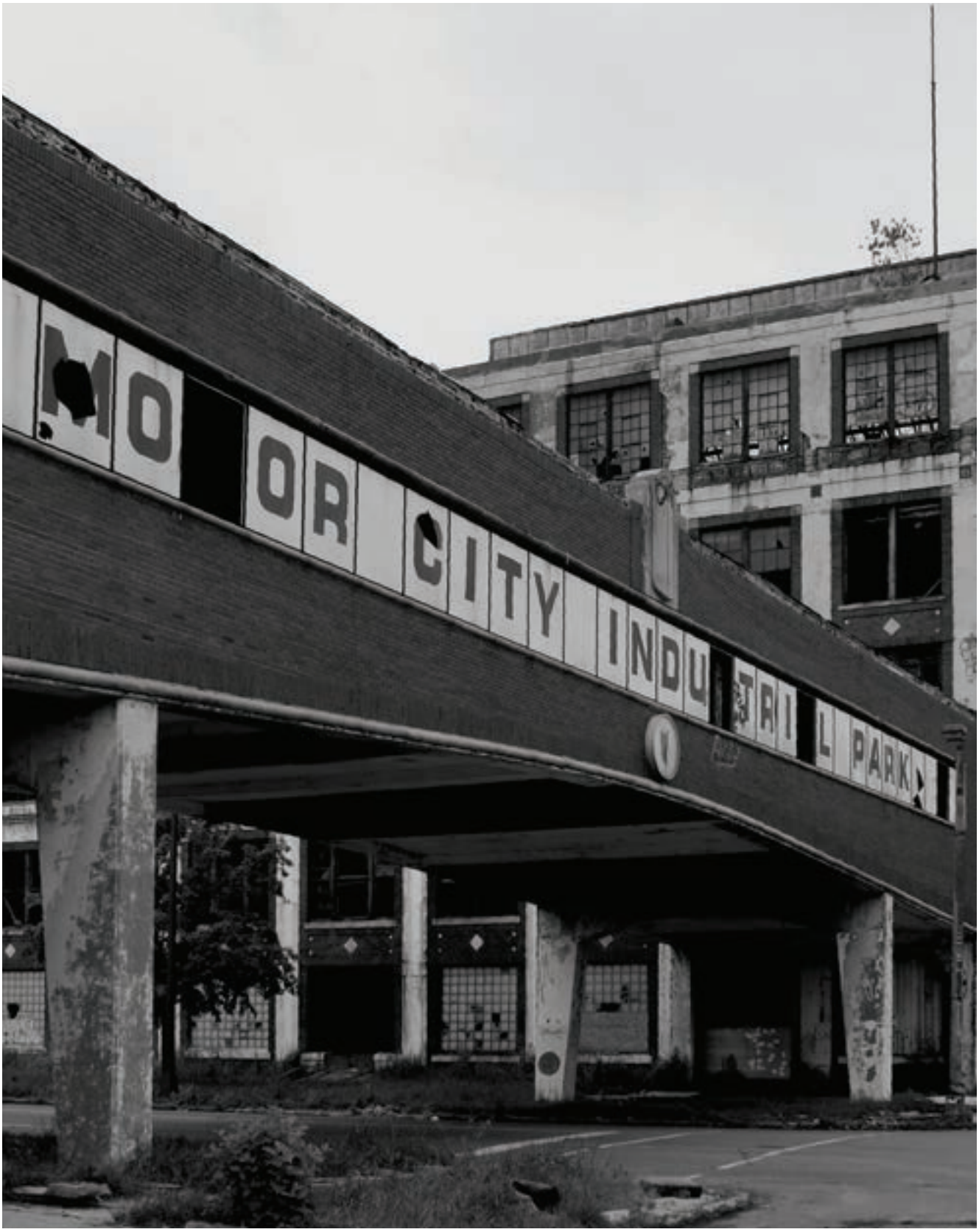
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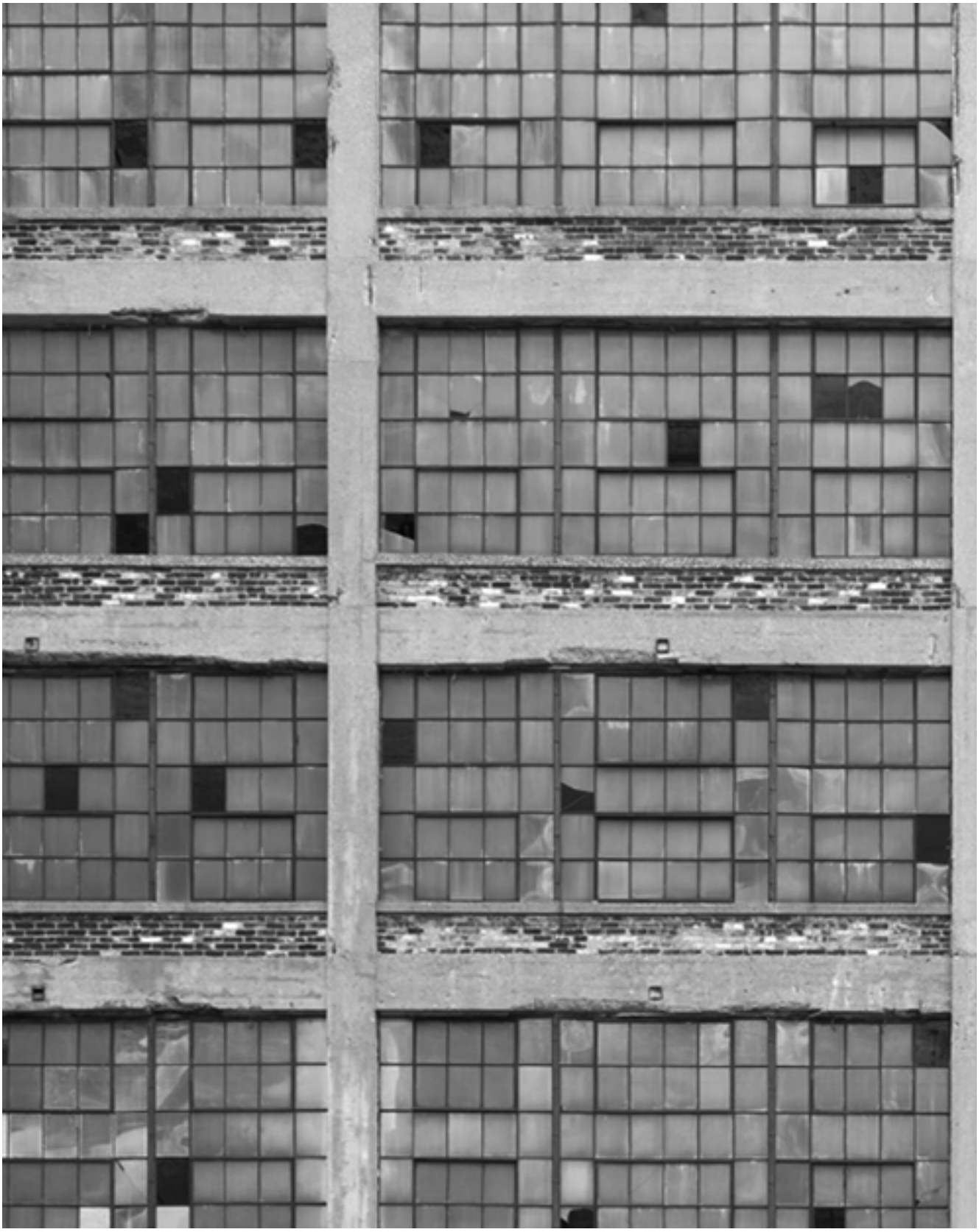

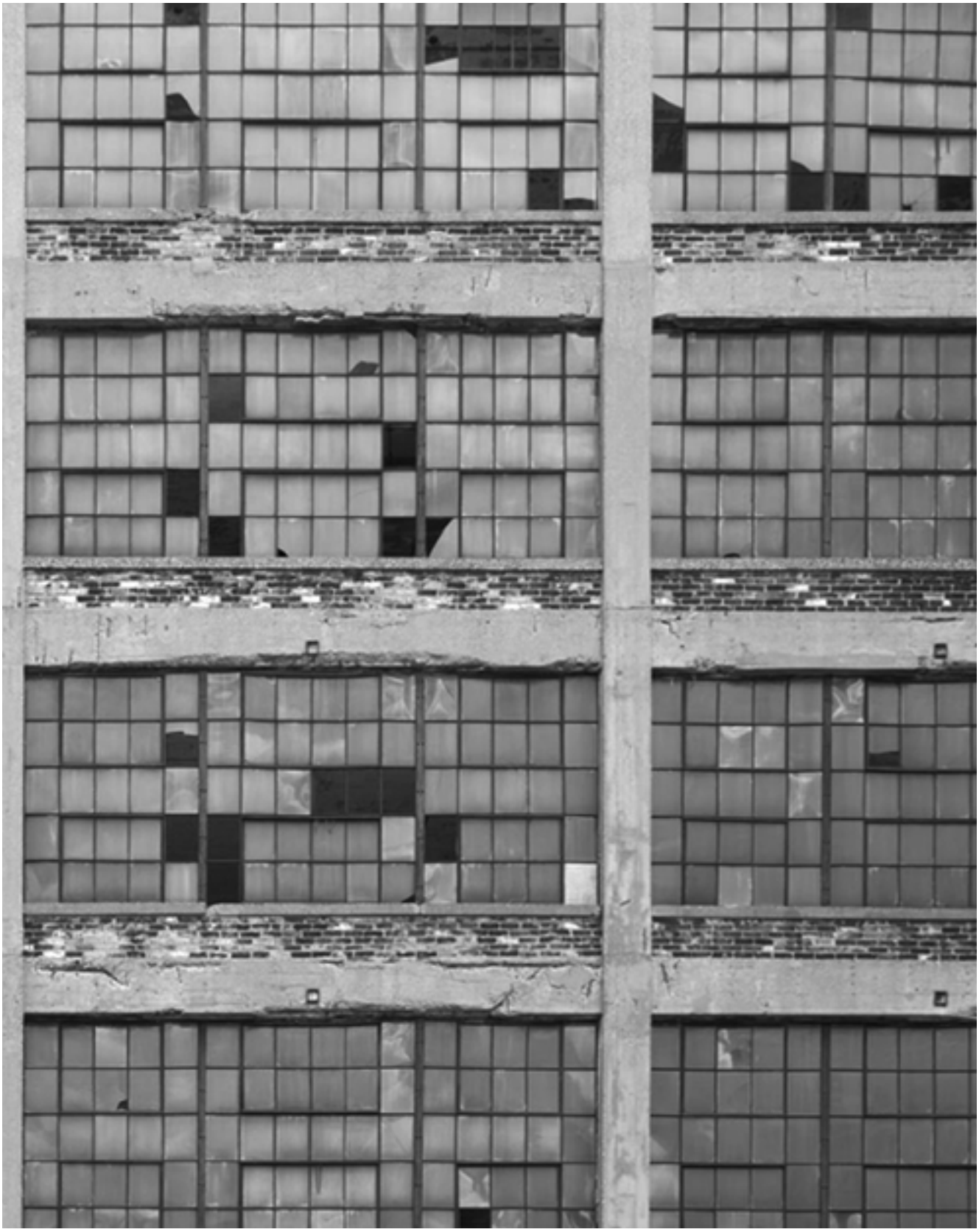


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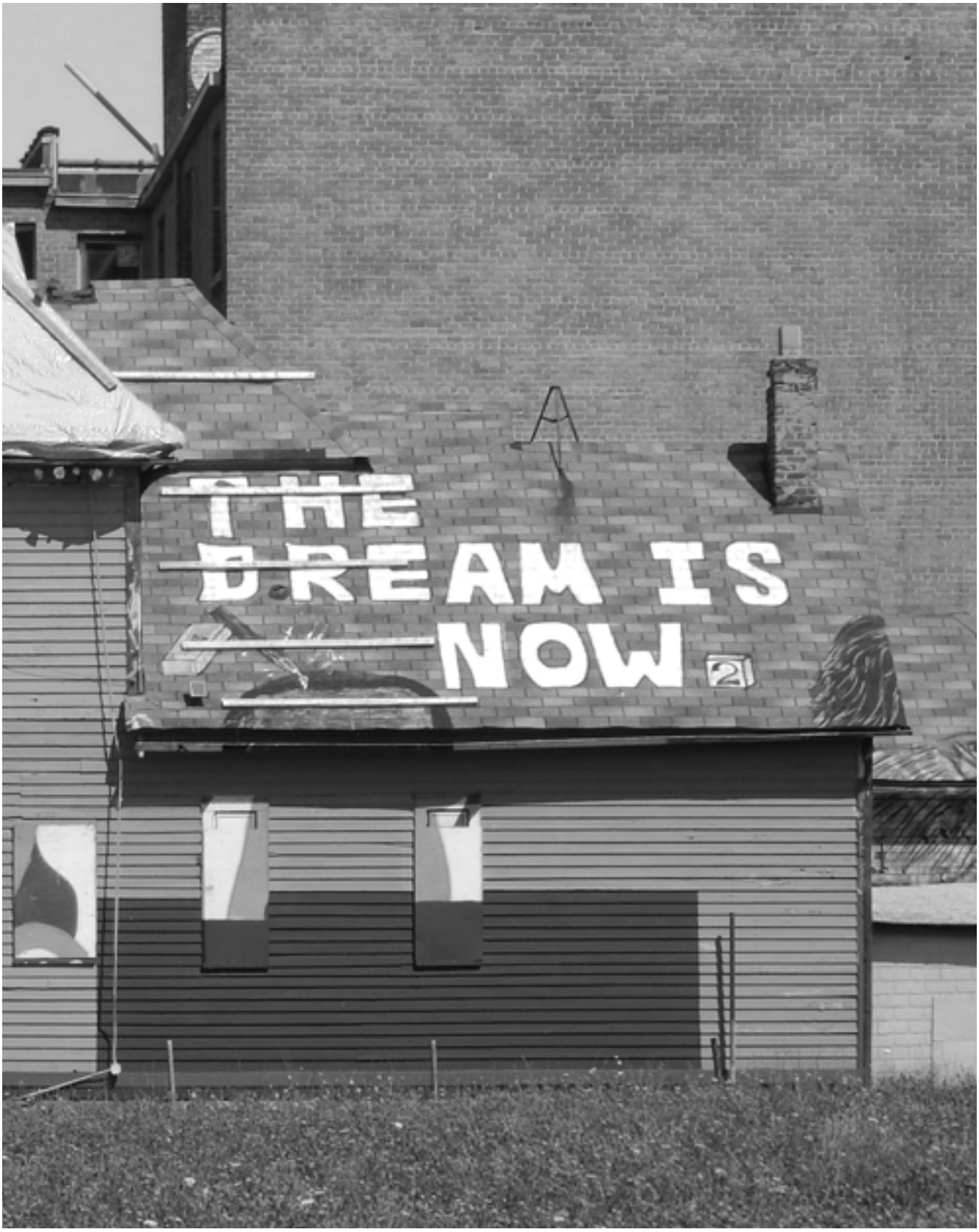
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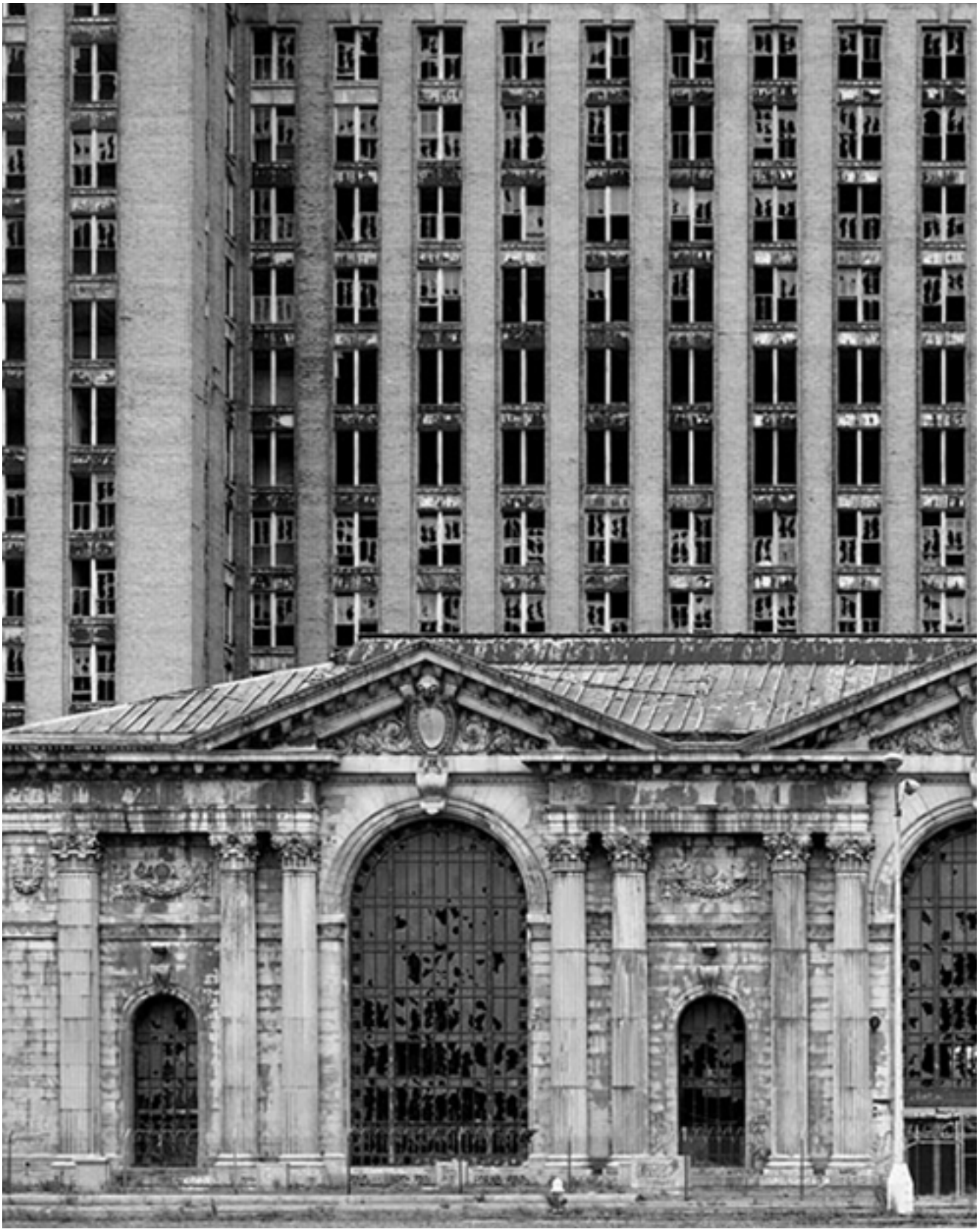


AUTO PIARTS


WE BUY SCRAP IRON & STEEL

Scott Hocking, *Hephaestus and the Garden of the Gods, Steam*, from the site-specific installation and photography project *Garden of the Gods*, created within Detroit's abandoned Packard automobile complex, 2009–2011

Scott Hocking, *Ziggurat, Rust, Summer II*, from the site-specific installation and photography project *Ziggurat and FRIT*, 2007–2008. Created using over 6,000 wooden floor blocks on Detroit's abandoned Fisher Body Plant 21

Scott Hocking, *The Egg and Michigan Central Train Station #4/364*, a site specific installation and photo project, created using thousands of marble fragments found within the iconic Detroit building, 2007–2013

Scott Hocking, *The Egg and MCTS #5017*, depicts the flooded basement of Roosevelt Warehouse in summer, viewed via an underground tunnel from Michigan Central Station, Detroit, 2010

Photo legend:

1. Detroit at night
2. Ford Company Logo
3. Heydays of Packard Plant
4. Abandoned Packard Plant
5. National Guard in Detroit during riots, 1967
6. Detroit Riots, 1967
7. William Livingston House in Brush Park, Detroit, from the book *Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005-2010
8. The Party Animal House aka The Doll House, burned March 7, 2014, Heidelberg Project
9. It could be any factory facade, photo by Katarina Dačić, 2015
10. Packard Plant rooftop, photo by Katarina Dačić, 2015
11. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Chancel and Crossing of Tintern Abbey, Looking towards the East Window*, 1794, pencil and watercolor on paper; 358 x 255mm
12. Columns found at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi
13. Melancholy object, Packard Plant rooftop, photo by Katarina Dačić
14. Melted clock, Cass Techincal High School, from the book *Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005-2010
15. I'm toast, Heidelberg Project, photo by Katarina Dačić, 2015
16. The dream is now, photo by Katarina Dačić, 2015
17. Michingan Central Station, from the book *Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005-2010
18. Auto parts/Utopia
19. Roosevelt Warehouse
20. We buy scrap iron and steel
21. Ball room, Lee Plaza Hotel, from the book *Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005-2010
22. Fisher Body Plant, photo by Katarina Dačić, 2015
23. Ziggurat, Scott Hocking, done in Fisher Body Plant, photo by Scott Hocking, 2007-2009
24. The work of Scott Hocking presented in the book *Detour in Detroit* written by Francesca Berardi, 2015

ALL OVER THE CITY:
An interview with Scott Hocking

Scott Hocking: I basically grew up in Detroit, but in a very racist-white-poor person section.

Katarina Dačić: Those racists problems, are they still on?

Scott Hocking: The racist problems in the city, sure, they still exist. They moved, they undulate, they change. Boy, I apologize, it smells like garbage. Weekend they burn all the trash, really, extreme lots of trash get burned on the weekend. Anyway, Redford, where I grew up has evolved as a city, so now there's more black people there than white people I think. I think the inner city is extending, like almost concentric circles, going out, out, out and some areas that were more affluent have just moved further away and some areas that used to be more white or racist or whatever, now those white people have moved further away. They are still racist and they want to keep moving further away. Meanwhile, there are people who are interested in this, who've come back into the center of the city, the center that had died. And now, the center is being reborn with the people who are not interested and beyond racism and wanted to evolve and move further and this is where you've been to. The truth is, you don't know everything, there might be bad people but there's also good people, you never know. And you're probably someone who's travelled over Europe, right? You've been to other countries, you've probably seen that no matter what country you're in there's assholes and there's good people.

Katarina Dačić: Before I came here, this is my first time in USA, and then I come to Detroit first time and you read a lot of this negative stuff and all the photos that I've seen, it looks like it's apocalypse but really, my impression is not like this, and then the first day I've been to McDonald's and I talked to a guy and I just asked him how do you live here and he asked me where do I come from, so I said I come from Serbia...

Scott Hocking: There was really rough time in Serbia not that long ago...

Katarina Dačić: And I've been there when the war was there, and he just said, you shouldn't generalize things, this is possible in every city, your country is not much different than this. And he seemed pretty happy to be here and pretty positive about the change that is about to happen.

Scott Hocking: You're going to encounter the people always who have different opinions about Detroit, and some of there opinions come from reading the newspaper, and some of these opinions come from living here for 70 years, some of the perspectives are from inner city perspectives, some are from the suburbs, some are racial, some are economic, there's just all these factors but the one thing that is certain, from my perspective, is that truth is always somewhere in between, the truth is not what you've seen in the newspaper, but it's also not, there's been some stories that sound almost too wonderful, like: oh, the artists can come to Detroit and live here for cheap, there's urban gardens everywhere, and you can do whatever you want! It's not really true either. It's all kind of slightly fictional. There was a time in Detroit when I was a kid, in the 1980s when it was very rough here, it was scary, it was dangerous. That's when drugs were a big problem, huge amount of the crack - cocaine epidemic. There was a lot of crime, related to drugs, there was always some statistic that showed that Detroit was number one in murders. There was a reality to that it existed at one time. And this reality, in my opinion, has just perpetuated, well beyond the reality. So now it has become a mythology. People now have ideas about Detroit as a mythology and then they come to the city, they are expecting something which you can still find, of course you can find apocalyptic looking areas in Detroit, but the energy is not apocalyptic. The energy is not like 'Oh my god I'm going to be killed at any moment'. It's more like living in a country, in a city. And that's why I'm still here. I like that there's a nature reclaiming and growing all around and it's

not just constant traffic and noise and concrete, there is a little bit of nature blending. That's the elements that I do like. But you will never see so much in a typical press article. It takes a long time for things to reach the press and the press often has an idea for the story and they want, whatever it happens, they want to fit it into this story. 'We're going to write a story about how the auto industry has ruined Detroit.' Well, if they come here and see that's not true... yeah, but we have to write a story about this so we're going to figure it out how to do this. I get this question a lot cause I've been traveling around the World and what people ask me is 'How you've been surviving since the bankruptcy?' Somehow, it's going to affect the artist who's been broke his entire life. The bankruptcy's been the best thing I've seen in years. Because of bankruptcy we have our street lamps now. The bankruptcy does not affect people on a daily basis here. Nothing changed. You walk around, you wouldn't feel any different. It's still a city, like any city, crime can happen, you can just run into a bad person who can look at you and look at you and hear your accents and see your cameras, and think 'these people aren't from around here, they don't know what are they doing, I'm going to rob them'. That can happen. But that can happen anywhere in the World. And the big difference here is that is not very crowded, but if you'd been walk on the streets of Cairo... Holy shit! Here, you got to be pretty dumb not to see someone coming out from behind. I don't know... Again, I've been here a long time, I've been here my whole life. So, it's changed. This neighborhood where I am, was dangerous when I moved in, and I've lived here for 15 years in this building. So this neighborhood was a lot different, the change that's been happening in the city, it's not an overnight thing, Detroit's been constant organic process of changing. So it had his height and before WWII was at its height. And then the war happened, and after the war it just kind of started going down and people keep spreading further and further out cause, why not? There is no reliance on the river, there's no natural topography that is blocking and stopping you from going, going, going... It's the city of the automobiles, so you can just keep taking these roads, going

further and further. There's people who drive an hour to go to work, every morning. Because they don't want to live here, they want to live out there somewhere and you can do it. Like I said, by the 1980s it was the roughest. When I was old enough to kind of explore the city, by the 80s, that's when the most of the massive abandonment happened: huge factories, the train station, the Packard Plant, the Fisher Body Plant, that's when all those really went abandoned, by the end of 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. That's when everybody started breaking in and scraping all the metal. And that's been happening for years and now that's kind of changed. Yeah, there's still abandonment but not like there was before. There's lot of houses abandoned but mostly these places are either being torn down or renovated or they've been burned down or they're born up better; the energy is shifted from everyone thinking there'll never be anything good happening to everyone thinking it's definitely going to happen.

Katarina Dačić: Do you know for how long Michigan Central Station is being locked?

Scott Hocking: Yeah, it's 1987-1988.

Katarina Dačić: And you did your work there in 2010?

Scott Hocking: I started going in there in 1998-1999, probably 1998 was the first time I went there.

Katarina Dačić: And did you have a lot of problems?

Scott Hocking: No. Back then you could drive your car in, it was different. It's changed dramatically. It got fenced, at one point there was talk about becoming police headquarters and home land security headquarters, after September 11 the attacks had happened in 2001. That obviously never happened. There've been a number of ideas of what's going to happen, during that process it just deteriorate further and further. But I have to tell

you that when I first started going in there it was still in a really good shape. There was still windows everywhere. And homeless man would just pick a room and have their own room. It was like a homeless hotel. And after it got fenced it became a bit harder to get in there. And most of the real, this is something a lot of people don't know, cause it's not obvious, but what destroys buildings like that, is not men coming in and scraping all the metal. That's part of it, but what really destroys them is kids, young kids who are predominantly from the suburbs, coming into the city, who just want to fuck shit up. They go into buildings, they break all the windows, they throw shit of the roofs, they just want to trash it. And the more everything is trashed, the more the rain gets in, the more the snow gets in, and water takes everything apart. Water is amazing. So once you get rid of the windows and once you put holes into the roof - done. It's not talked about in the news, they don't say 'Those suburban kids!', no. The suburban kids talk about how a shithole Detroit is, but the kids in Detroit aren't doing it. The kids in Detroit aren't going into abandoned buildings and exploring them, they live, that's what they are used to, it's around them all the time, it's not some fascination. But from the outside, this is the place where you can come and fuck around and then, yeah, go back home and everything's fine. So yeah, the train station eventually has been further and further secured and by the time I started to decide to build a sculpture in there, it was 2007, I started really to plot it out, and decide where I wanted to build it, but the first step in my process is document everything. I know every place. I could think it through with my eyes closed. So what happened is, by 2010 or 2011 I think, I started actually building it and around 2011 the owners of the train station decided they're going to hire a company to start cleaning it out. So they cleaned everything out that had this pestis. But back then, everything had this pestis. So I was in there working and through really kind of lucky intervention I met a guy who knew the owners and he said I'm going to try to convince them to let you keep working and I think at that time I was at the point when I had enough of the name, as like a known person in the city, that I

think it helped and they agreed to let me keep working, I had to sign a contract and said I would never sue them if I get a disease or something. During that time, I spent about a year and a half building an egg inside and that was made out of the marble, the walls used to be out of the marble.

Katarina Dačić: That's what I wanted to ask you, did you use only materials that you found there?

Scott Hocking: Yeah. That's how I like to work. So even the process I am doing up North, I am building a giant boat-like sculpture out of an old barn, all of the wood from the barn, no new wood. So, I have to buy screws, to screw it together, and in the case of Train Station I have tools, but nothing, no glue, no adhesive, no hardware, just balance. But that's been destroyed now too. Because in the end, they cleaned out all that marble as well, so it's all been thrown in the trash. I wish I could have seen them trying to take it apart, because, wow, that must have been a hell of a job. They probably were cursing my name, this mother fucker that made the heaviest, craziest thing that they had to take apart. But at some point at that process I also learned that the man who owns the train station, he doesn't care, he cares about money. But I do think it's going to be renovated and that somebody with money is going to do something to it. It's Detroit is just really popular right now. And people with money, like Packard Plant owner, there is a lot of people speculating that Detroit is a good investment right now. And I think that that would be the building that will survive. It's too interesting not to survive.

Juan Arturo Garcia: About the Egg, I have a question, in your opinion, what is the actual artwork, is it the Egg, or the document?

Scott Hocking: This is always an interesting conversation to me, cause this comes up every time, and for me it's interesting that people want to know if it's one or the other. Cause it's often

that people say, what is the artwork, is it the photo or it's this, so I always have to say it's both, so it's not just a document. That would diminish the photo project. So when I do a project like this and building a giant installation which I know most people will never encounter, the only people who will encounter it in most cases are homeless man, or scrapers, or urban explorers, or in this case, these pestis workers, but most people will never discover this object, but I love the idea that I am making something that can be discovered, a mystery. People will walk up to the train station, turn and go 'Wow, what the fuck is this' and have to try to figure out what is it, who made it, why, blablabla... This, to me, is very interesting. And I know, I have no control, I don't own it, it could be destroyed, it could be vandalized, I don't know, all these options could happen. And actually it was destroyed first, and then all these pestis clean up worker came in and destroyed the rest of it. So it was already being destroyed.

Katarina Dačić: So people were really destroying it?

Scott Hocking: Oh, it always happens with my work, I have to be really secret about what I'm working on, because it draws attention. Sometimes people want to photograph it, sometimes people want to destroy it. So you have to be careful. If I don't get something done in time, it will get destroyed. But once I feel I'm done I am completely fine with it being destroyed. So this is the answer to your question, this is the installation I'm making but it's also an elaborate prop for photo series. I am making an elaborate photo set up, like a still life. I know the whole time why I'm making it in the place where I'm making it, cause I can see the photos and deciding where it's going to go in the building based on where I envision it to be in the photos, and I'm making another photos, it becomes a narrative, I'm making a story I think, that involves this structure but it also involves the history of my experience making the structure and creating a story. And I know that that would outlast the object. So I'm thinking about two projects at once. So this is important to me because when I was first

making art, I wasn't trained in photography, I never took photos, and when I did start taking photos, it was just a documenting, so it took a long time before I felt my photos are also an art project, and then it took even longer when it came to to point that I was thinking 'Holy shit, I could combine these two, I don't have to just take photos and just make sculptures, I could do projects where I could do both. I'm doing the both, but there are still individual. They are for two different audiences, mostly the audience that sees them outside would never be the audience that would go to the gallery. And most of the time the people who would see them in museum would never be the people who would see them outside. I like this, it's a kind of play with two different worlds.

And another strange this is how nowadays no one really believes images as easily anymore, so there's always people wondering if I made that or if it's like Photoshop. And eventually someone says 'Oh you made that!' They didn't ever realize that it was either already there or maybe it's just fictional, I don't know. But there are definitely people who question weather I made something and those are the people I have to take them there and show them, but I can't, it's impossible. So I do take videos now, I have nice Canon and I can film myself working.

Katarina Dačić: You film the process?

Scott Hocking: It started with a documentary, there was a German documentary film maker who came here years ago and she wanted to film me making The Egg and I couldn't get her in the building, I could only go there alone, no one else could come, so she had to sneak in, which of course she couldn't so they asked me to film myself for them and that led to me kind of thinking I should probably do this more often, as some kind of evidence.

Katarina Dačić: I am really interested in your work Ziggurat and I am wondering do you make parallel yourself between ancient ruins and modern ruins, and how do you see this, was this on purpose?

Scott Hocking: Yeah, yeah, of course it's on purpose. I have an interest in using ancient symbology, weather that'll be a pyramidal structure or an egg, these are ancient, ancient symbols. What I'm building North up now is a boat, a vessel. One of the many, many things, cause it certainly isn't one thing, that that Ziggurat piece was about, but one of the many things I thought it was interesting was the perception, the difference in perception between a ruin and a monument. And how does this happen. How does something that's a ruin becomes something that's revered as a monument versus something that's decried as sad and depressing, and I think it's time, I think it's memory. So there's certain amount of closeness people here have, there are people alive who remember the 1920s here, and those people are nostalgic, their dad worked in that factory and they're sad for what they used to see. Here I am, I'm 40 years old, the only Detroit I've ever known is so much worse than what we're having right now. So I don't have a nostalgic reference point for the good old days of Detroit and that I think is a unique perspective that allows me to see these places as monuments, as future monuments, as places that could be revered as opposed to remembering what they were. And I also have a real interest in finding the beauty in transformation and I think that we see beauty in transformation all the time, we recognize it, sunset, sunrise, you know, rainbow coming after a thunderstorm, whatever, transition can be beautiful, but we often ignore the beauty in the transformation of decay, we're afraid of that, I think it's too close to our own mortality, we don't like to think about how everything dies and we're going to die. Me, I'm okay with that. I think we should think about that. I think there's beauty in that transformation. So, the death of a building, the death of an industry, the death of a city, oh well, it will keep changing, it's a cycle, it will be reborn into something else and there's beauty to be found in that transformation. So these places, especially Fisher Body, they became really important to me, I could walk there. I just got to know them intimately, they were like my walk in the woods, they were my nature, I could hike to the top and be like climbing a mountain, you don't have

that around here, and I needed my isolation, it was my isolation. So that place to me become very special, I could only see it as a place that should be revered. So when you know it everyone sees it the opposite, everyone driving in the freeway looks up and thinks 'Oh there's another abandoned building, Detroit is giant shithole of abandonment' but I'm in there and I'm looking at these columns and vanishing points and feel like I'm in an Egyptian temple. Building a Ziggurat in there was an attempt to shift a perspective on the building and it was a crazy project, when I started building it I wasn't sure it was a good idea and it took me 8 months to build it. And I think people tried to interpret it in all kinds of ways - what am I trying to say about auto industry, what am I trying to say about capitalism, there was a guy who did a lecture once and he had a clip of the pyramid and I heard him say 'We have here Scott Hocking Ziggurat piece which is essentially saying that capitalism is no different than Zoroastrianism' and then he moved on to the next one and I was like 'Wow, did I say that' but fine, because again it's very loaded symbol, the pyramid, loaded, and it could be anything from people trying to think I'm trying to make a comment on America, and you know, whatever, cultures, to making a comment on aliens, like everyone has their own thoughts that can be comical for some people, it can be serious, I don't know, profound, but for me that's the trigger for working with a symbol like that. And in the end it allows me to spend time in a place that is important to me and collaborate, it's tempting to collaborate with a building like that, it's terrifying, because it's already so impressive, so giant and intimidating, it has such an energy of its own and I'm going to come in there and I'm going to be like 'I'm going to make something cool', it's tricky, it's scary, cause you can very easily make something that looks really dumb, so that's where the photos come in (laughing), take good photos and maybe it works.

Katarina Dačić: How do you secure your sculpture while working on it?

Scott Hocking: I don't.

Juan Arturo Garcia: Has any project been vandalized while working on it?

Scott Hocking: Yes, every single one.

Juan Arturo Garcia: And you just rebuild it, for as long as it takes?

Scott Hocking: Yeah. It's always exercise in thrust and exercise in letting go of control and believing that this will work. I am really interested in the idea of chance. And as an artist, going with your gut instinct. So, it has been a lot of experiments like that that led to very interesting results. The pyramid, for example, while I was building it, there was these men there taking all these pipes of the ceiling, they had these giant saws and they were cutting them down, illegally. But there was one running over the top of my pyramid. And they would cut them and they would just fall on the ground, boom, and they take them and put them in a truck and drive them away. One day I was in there and all, they all stopped working, the saws turned off, everybody stopped talking and they had little phones they could talk to each other and I went to one guy and I said 'What's happening, why is everyone being so quiet?' And the guy said: 'The city is fencing the building right now'. So I said 'Okay, see you later, I'm leaving'. And I left and I went home. The next day I came back they had taken the whole fence, the scrappers. They waited till the fence was done, until they left, and they went out there and scrapped it. Amazing, I know! There's something really crazy, but the point of the story is that one day I came back and the pipe was gone. My pyramid was fine. So these guys, these criminals, were respectful of my crazy art project. To me, that's really amazing. These random dudes had an encounter with an art project and had to make a decision - do we care, do we destroy it, do we like this guy. I like that this process happened, with total strangers who definitely don't go to art galleries and they decided to save it, and it couldn't

have been easy. I don't know how they did it, but they did it. You can see it in my photos, in one photo while I'm building it you can see the pipe, in the next one it's gone, like, wow. On the other hand there were people later on, right before it was destroyed, who came in and they removed all the blocks and rebuilt it so it had, it was a pyramid but it had, like, towers, and a hole in it, like a castle, and I saw photos on flickr or something, but I never got photos myself, cause it was destroyed way too fast after that. I came back to The Egg, there was one period with The Egg where I couldn't work on it for many months, and I came back and it was graffiti, huge section of it had been torn down, but the one thing with both of these projects, The Pyramid and The Egg, the amount of labor they would take to destroy that is usually too much for a random vandal. You know, it's so much work for me to build them, they're so heavy, and solid, and if someone tries to destroy them it's just as much work, they are not interested in spending so much time. And one at the Packard Plant where I put the TVs up on the roof, that was destroyed so quickly. There was probably 15 different TVs and I would say, probably two of them stayed for a long time, but the others were destroyed very quickly. People, I think, even the vandals decide which one they want to destroy and which one they want to keep, which is think is also interesting. Everyone ends up with making an artistic decision.

Juan Arturo Garcia: And have you ever been documenting some sort of post-ending life of the objects?

Scott Hocking: Yeah, most of the cases I go back and photograph after it's gone. I haven't gone back to the train station, because I can't, but it would be nice to go back, maybe one day it will be renovated and I can walk on that floor, that would be cool.

Katarina Dačić: And then you can Photoshop your object...

Scott Hocking: (laughing) Right, cause I got really good Photoshop skills, I could put up my Egg in anything.

Juan Arturo Garcia: Listening to all these stories, it's very interesting, this relationship of working inside a ruin, making some new, made out of old things, that you know it's again going to be a ruin, like ouroboros, like some sort of the strange loop.

Scott Hocking: Because I believe in ouroboros, I believe as humans on the Earth, we're just caught in that repetitive cycle, and we don't learn from it, we often, we always think we're somehow better or different from the past, and I my opinion, we're not, we're just doing the same shit over and over again, forever, and this idea of progress to me, is an illusion, I think it is. There's every culture and every time period, always thinks that there is, somehow, the pinnacle, and we've, like, learned so much, and those people back there, they didn't know this, we know this now, every time, and it's just a repetitive cycle. So when I see places in Detroit that are decaying and abandoned, when I see a city like Detroit, you know, or dying, or being rebirth, man, that's been happening since the dawn of times. Go to Rome, go to, you know, go to The Sahara Desert, and see the cities that used to be there when there was the water. The water was there and now there's a desert. Because Earth is changing all the time, we're just tiny little freaking' bugs out here, building our little ant castles, I don't know, I just don't see, I don't see us being any different, and to me, building a pyramid inside an abandoned auto factory, I'm trying to say we're not that dissimilar from the ancient people and future people won't be that dissimilar from us, we're always going to the same cycles of death and rebirth, I don't know what it's about, but this is the divine comedy, you know, this is it.

Juan Arturo Garcia: Detroit's been reborn at least two times, for the people that are still around, so it's a crazy relationship...

Scott Hocking: Yeah, I wrote a piece for this magazine in Paris and then it got reprinted for this Detroit Research book that came out this year, but basically it was me saying what you just said.

The history of Detroit is not the automobile, that's the last 100 years, the history of Detroit is 300 years, when the French people came here and named it Detroit, but that's not the history of this place, humans have been living in this spot near the river for thousands of years. This short term memory of Detroit is a problem, the short term memory of any place is a problem, when people talk about the history of the city, I just feel like, wow, that is so short sided. It's always turning into something else. Just because we're not making cars anymore, who gives a fuck, to me that is so short sided. We used to make stoves, we used to make cigars, we used to be farmers here, and nobody's like 'oh, the cigar days'. But there's certainly nobody talking about the ancient civilizations...

Juan Arturo Garcia: And that's a funny thing, how do you trigger memory, personal memory, or with some symbols, I think there are certain symbols, and even though you don't know, you've never been there, they trigger something, some sort of memory that's not within you but you can tell there's something behind it...

Scott Hocking: It's hard to understand because I think it's beyond our capacities, but I believe there's a memory, this is going to sound really far out, but the blood coursing through our veins has never died. This blood came from our fathers and mothers, and their fathers and mothers and it just keeps going back. This blood, if you're alive, that means this blood has passed out since the first fucking humans, right? It's crazy. I think there's memory in DNA. And I think the ancient people understood this better than we do. So I'm interested in these kinds of mysteries of life, so when I make a crazy sculpture in an abandoned building, I like that someone's going to discover it, and have a moment of thinking 'What the fuck is this?' It's a mystery, I want to create some mystery and have people encounter mysteries. And another thing you never know about driving around Detroit is, you come and you can see all this abandonment now, but when you see The Russell Industrial Center, which is still in function, or you see The

Packard Plant, which is massive but abandoned, there were dozens upon dozens, that all looked like that, all over the city, they're all gone now. Those are the only reminisce now, there's not many left, but there were so many more, that have been all torn down, and there's already houses built there and those houses are abandoned now. You know, the city burned down in 1801, they rebuilt and repotted the whole city 200 years ago. It's a much longer history and it's very common nowadays in our modern culture to not be a very good student of history.

Juan Arturo Garcia: This is like, off topic, but we would like to ask you for advice, we've been doing some sort of sourcing of material, like taking objects from abandoned houses, would you recommend that?

Scott Hocking: Yeah, it's fine. Abandoned house most often would be a place where homeless guy might live in nowadays, they don't live in the industrial buildings as much anymore. I always avoided houses, because houses to me were very personal, and the energy was often, like, someone's entire life spent there, it felt too close. In factories I never felt a ghostly feeling, I never felt like I was in someone's private space, but houses I often felt like that. Like, I might find hand written letters or photos of a family, it's just for me it started to feel too close to their lives. I'm not saying it's bad, I'm just saying I never got good ideas about this. But I know lots of people who do, I have a friend, well, Mitch, Mitch and Gina, they did this project twice now, where they've gone into the houses of neighbors that died and they've just taken all their stuff and categorize them in chronological order and made them into displays of entire lives. Intense, oh, totally intense. Of course it depends which neighborhood you go to, you have to respect people who still live there. There's got to be certain amount of thinking about respect of people who live in these places, but in other cases if there's literally no one living there, you can find streets where literally every house is abandoned, to me that's less intrusive. That would be my advice.

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